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THE PROBLEMS OF COUNTRY LIFE.

ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION; SIR HORACE PLUNKETT,
Chairman.

HORACE PLUNKETT: I shall base my plea for a more thorough and systematic study of rural problems upon the contention that for many decades we have been guilty, unconsciously no doubt, of having gravely neglected one side, and that surely an important side, of western civilization. I believe the present attitude of public opinion toward the old question of town and country is due to economic tendencies and social changes, the general character and effect of which I must briefly indicate.

Among western nations the progress of civilization has riveted men's thoughts upon the great centers of industry and commerce, where the most startling changes have taken place. The dweller in the modern city not unnaturally believes that the many and varied improvements recently effected in its conditions have fully counteracted the apprehended evils of concentration. He is confident that the rapid and cheap transit facilities which enable the industrial and commercial classes to live in ever-widening suburbs will realize the ideal of *rus in urbe*. What with improved sanitation and physical culture on the one hand, and the multiplication of movements for intellectual advancement and social betterment on the other, the townsman of the future is expected to unite the physical health and longevity of the Bœotian with the mental superiority of the Athenian.

This somewhat optimistic survey seems to me to neglect one important factor. It does not appear to have

been sufficiently considered how far the ethical and physical health of the modern city has been due to the constant influx of fresh blood from the country. At present the town makes an irresistible appeal to the spirit of enterprise, to the growing craving for excitement, to the desire to live where there is most life. The country is thus the reservoir from which the town draws its best citizenship. You cannot keep on indefinitely skimming the pan and have equally good milk left. In America the drain may continue a while longer without the inevitable consequences becoming plainly visible; but sooner or later, if the balance of trade in this human traffic be not adjusted, the raw material out of which urban society is made will be seriously deteriorated. When that time comes, the symptoms of national degeneracy will be properly charged against those who failed to foresee the evil and treat the cause.

The present attitude of the public mind on this question is no doubt due to the same economic causes which evolved the modern city and urbanized the thoughts and activities of progressive peoples. The industrial revolution which robbed the country of its manufactures, and the establishment of "the world market" by improved and cheapened transportation, have produced a radical change in the relationship between the two sections, rural and urban, into which every civilized people is divided. Within the last century every town relied largely on the produce of the fields around its walls. The countrymen coming into the weekly market were the principal customers for the wares of the town craftsmen. This simple exchange, as we all know, has developed into the complex commercial operations of modern times. Today most large towns derive their means of sustenance from the food-growing tracts of the whole world; and I doubt

whether any are necessarily dependent on the adjoining agricultural communities or feel themselves specially concerned for their welfare. And yet the reciprocity between the producers of food and raw material of clothes, on the one hand, and manufacturers and general traders of the towns, on the other, has not passed; it has actually increased since the days of steam and electricity. Town consumers are still dependent upon agricultural producers, who, in turn, are much larger consumers than formerly of all kinds of commodities made in towns. Forty-two per cent of materials used in manufacture in the United States are from the farm, which also contributes seventy per cent of the country's exports. I say, therefore, that the old mutual interest of town and country remains; but in the break-up of the personal connection which belonged to the local market the sense of the corresponding mutual obligation has been lost.

The process of readjustment has gone on rapidly in the cities, but slowly in the country. This is particularly true in the matter of business methods.

The superiority of the business methods of the town over those of the country is obvious, but I think it is not universally understood wherein that superiority lies. What strikes the eye is the material apparatus of business—the telephone, the typewriter, street cars, the advertisements, the exchange; all these form an impressive contrast with the slow, simple life of the farmer, who very likely scratches his accounts on a shingle or keeps them in his head. But most of this apparatus is due merely to the necessity of swift movement in the concentrated process of exchange and distribution. Such swiftness is neither necessary nor possible in the process of isolated production. But there is an economic law as applicable to rural as to urban pursuits, which has been recognized

and obeyed by the farmers of most European countries, including Ireland, but has been too little heeded by the farmers of the United States and Great Britain. Under modern economic conditions things must be done in a large way if they are to be done profitably, and this necessitates resort to combination.

The advantage which combination gives to the town over the country was recognized long before the recent economic changes forced men to combine. In the old towns of Europe all trades began as strict and exclusive corporations. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries new scientific and economic forces broke up these combinations, which were far too narrow for the growing volume of business to be done, and an epoch of competition began. The great towns of America opened their business career during this epoch, and have brought the arts of competition to a higher perfection than exists in Europe. But it has always been known that competition did not exclude combination against the consumer; and it is now beginning to be perceived that the fiercer the competition, the more surely does it lead in the end to such combination.

A trade combination has three principle objects: It aims first at improving what I may call the internal business methods of the trade itself, by eliminating the waste due to competition, by economizing staff, plant, etc., by the ready transmission of intelligence, and in other ways. In the second place, it aims at strengthening the trade against outside interests. These may be of some various kinds; but in the typical case we are considering, namely, the combination of great middlemen who control exchange and distribution, the outside interests are those of the producer on one side and the consumer on the other; and the trade combination, by its organized unity of action,

succeeds in lowering the prices it pays to the unorganized producer and in raising the prices it charges to the unorganized consumer. In the third place, the trade combination aims at political control. By various methods it tries to influence the course of legislation and administration so as to favor its own interests in their relation to other interests. I am not now arguing the question whether or how far this action on the part of trade combinations is morally justifiable. My point is simply that the towns have flourished at the expense of the country by the use of these methods, and that the countryman must adopt them if he is to get his own again.

This truth will be easily realized if we look for a moment into the problem of distribution as it applies to agricultural produce and see what the essentials of it are. This produce finds its chief market in the great cities. Their populations must have their food sent in so that it can be rapidly distributed; and this requires that the consignments must be delivered regularly, in large quantities and of such uniform quality that a sample will give a correct indication of the whole.

The fulfillment of these three conditions is not within the power of isolated farmers, however large. It is an open question whether farmers should themselves undertake the distribution of their produce through agencies of their own, thus saving the wholesale and possibly the retail profits. But unquestionably they should be so well organized at home that they can take this course if they are unfairly treated by organized middlemen. The Danish farmers, who are very highly organized, have established (with government assistance which their organization enabled them to secure) a very efficient machinery for distributing their butter, bacon, and eggs in the British markets. Other European farming communities are be-

coming equally well organized, and so will control the cost of marketing their produce. But where, as in America and the United Kingdom, the town dominates the country, the machinery of distribution is owned by the business men of the towns and is worked by them in their own interests. They naturally take from the unorganized producers, as well as from the unorganized consumers, the full business value of the service they render. With the growing cost of living, this is a matter of urgent importance to the towns. In the pending cheaper-food campaign, voices are heard calling the farmers to account for their uneconomical methods.